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A year spent teaching literature in Japan made clear to me that Irish Language and Literature punches above its weight in the consciousness of Japanese teachers of literature in English, so Irene De Angelis’ fascinating, closely-focused study makes for illuminating reading. IASIL-Japan (International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures in Japan) is an energetic body, running its own vibrant events and conferences, but the commerce with Ireland has been two-way. Irish poets have responded warmly to the call to teach, give readings and immerse themselves in Japan, and this book is the legacy of those bi-cultural and transcultural experiences, some of them fleeting and some very long-term. This work of
criticism is designed as a companion piece to an anthology, *Our Shared Japan: An Anthology of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Dedalus, 2007) of which she is a co-editor.

She is well aware of the critical importance of Japanese aesthetic in mainstream modernism, mainly through the Imagist movement, and of the tracks by which it arrived in England and the United States. Many of those tracks travelled by way of Ireland, through the work Pound did as Yeats’s amanuensis and as literary godfather to Joyce, and before them, through the fascinated writings of Lafcadio Hearn, and in particular *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* (1904). But her project is different from this, and much more finely focused on contemporary Irish poets, in particular how Seamus Heaney, Michael Hartnett, Ciaron Carson, Thomas Kinsella, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, Gabriel Rosenstock and Joseph Woods manifest their engagement with matters Japanese or uniquely Japanese forms and aesthetic ideas. Sometimes these poets visited Japan, but some lived there, for long periods or permanently. Although she apologises for not including other writers, it is an impressive roll-call as it stands. Heaney probably speaks for several generations of Irish poets when he replied to Mitsuko Ohno’s question in 2002 as to how Japan had changed him:

> The excitement of encountering the true note and the clean line, the corroboration that comes from recognizing rightness of artistic effect—this is the big fortification I get from Japanese poetry [...] A general anti-slovenliness. A sense of inner rule. A reticence and a precision. (cited on p.14)

The book takes many paths through the material it analyses. For example, in Chapter 3, she engages in some utterly enthralling (French) genetic criticism, moving between drafts of Derek Mahon’s unfinished poem about Hiroshima (among the Derek Mahon Papers at Emory University) and a quite different finished product derived from this earlier attempt at ‘Japanese’ poetry in the eponymous poem of the collection, *The Snow Party* (1975). She registers a variety of other influences closer to home (Yeats, Joyce, Frost, MacNeice) than Bashō, but the process by which she documents Mahon’s labour to avoid overstatement, and the drive to ‘subtraction’, understatement and minimalism is impressive, especially given the epic nature of the human disasters to which the poems respond. I am persuaded that this kind of writing by reductionist techniques is indeed the shock of the new, and that it is central to imagism and influenced by the restrained aesthetic of Japan. De Angelis elsewhere describes Japanese poetry in its avoidance of rhetoric and abstraction, the half-saying of things, as ‘chaste’ and ‘reticent’ (p. 39).

I found it instructive to be directed to Heaney’s haiku phase which De Angelis identifies as occurring between 1987 and 1996, and sees as a response to the death of his parents. She reads it as Heaney’s being fortified
by the haiku’s traditional association with the transience of all moral phenomena (*lacrima rerum* in the European tradition; *mono no aware* in the Japanese), and tracks a turn to nature in *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Haw Lantern* (1987) and *The Spirit Level* (1996), and a preoccupation with liminal moments.

This study is well versed in English translations of Japanese haiku, and as well its take-up internationally, and sufficiently muscular to deal with variations from the traditional form and subject-matter. One is led to appreciate the very different forms haiku can take in the hands of Rosenstock, Michael Hartnett and Paul Muldoon. After immersing the reader in the nature haiku of Gabriel Rosenstock, the Founding Associate of the Haiku Foundation in Dublin, the discussion of Michael Hartnett’s use of the form for confessional purposes after the failure of his marriage in *Inchicore Haiku* (1985) demonstrates the inventive ways in which foreign poets have felt free to set the form running in new ways:

A pint of Guinness –
black as my Catholic heart,
black as broken vows.

This is a truly enlightening critical study, which puts flesh on an affiliation between islands at the opposite ends of the immense Eurasian landmass, and the commerce between their poetic traditions. Although very narrowly focused, it is various, and engaging, and culturally sophisticated, and scholarship which operates at the level of the word as well as at the level of culture.

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